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From Violence to Voice: Rereading Gender and Normalcy in Meghna Gulzar's *Chhapaak*

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Abstract: The core principle of sociology and psychology shows that human beings perceive the world through the lens of some standard norms which are not fixed but socially constructed. In this context, Lennard J. Davis (2013) observes. "Each of us endeavors to be normal... We rank our intelligence, our cholesterol level, our weight, height, sex drive, bodily dimensions along some conceptual line from subnormal to above average" (1). This fabricated perception of "normalcy" becomes deeply problematic for persons with disabilities, especially women, who are doubly subaltern—being women and being disabled.

The present paper examines Meghna Gulzar's *Chhapaak* (2020), a cinematic retelling of the real-life story of acid attack survivor, activist, and T.V. host Laxmi Agarwal. The film exposes the grotesque face of gender violence, where toxic masculinity punishes women who defy patriarchal demands. Through her protagonist Malti (Deepika Padukone), Gulzar subverts notions of physical beauty and critiques oppressive normalcy. More importantly, the film gives survivors a voice: Malti's iconic declaration, "Unhone meri surat badli hai, mera mann nahi" (They changed my face, not my spirit), transforms violence into testimony. The paper argues that *Chhapaak* is not merely about trauma but about agency, resilience, and the feminist reconstitution of selfhood.

Keywords: Gender, Toxic Masculinity, Misogyny, Normalcy, Disability, Survivor Voices, Testimony, Agency.

Introduction: The existentialist philosopher, Simone de Beauvoir in her classic *The Second Sex* (1973) asserts: "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (301). This statement highlights how femininity is socially constructed rather than biologically predetermined. From cradle to grave, women are forced to perform assigned roles—: to be a "good" daughter, wife, mother, or friend. and those who resist face violence and marginalization although they constitute half of the population. Gender inequity manifests in feticide, dowry deaths, rapes, honor killings, marital rape, domestic violence, cyberbullying and acid attacks.

Meghna Gulzar's *Chhapaak* (2020) dramatizes one of the most heinous forms of gendered violence: acid attack. Inspired by the life of Laxmi Agarwal, the film narrates how a teenage girl's dreams were shattered by patriarchal vengeance, but her spirit was transformed into activism. Notably, the film opens with Malti already engaged in legal battles, signaling that the survivor's voice, not the victim's silence, will frame the narrative (*Chhapaak* 00:02:15).

Objective of the research: This paper analyzes *Chhapaak* as a cinematic testimony of acid attack survivors. It studies how the film critiques patriarchal beauty norms, exposes the psychological and social aftermath of violence, and foregrounds survivor agency. It also contextualizes acid violence within socio-legal frameworks, emphasizing the shift from silence to resistance.

Main Text: Acid attack is indeed a burning issue of our age. According to the National Crime Records Bureau, Bengaluru city topped the list of acid attacks in 2022, with eight women falling victim (NCRB Report 2022). The National Commission for Women defines an acid attack as “any act of throwing acid or using acid in any form on the victim with the intention of or with knowledge that such person is likely to cause permanent or partial damage or deformity or disfiguration to any part of the body” (NCW Report). Similarly, Kalantry and Kestenbaum, in their work ‘Acid Violence in Bangladesh: A Socio-Legal Analysis (2011)’ describe acid attack as “intentional acts of violence in which perpetrators throw, spray, or pour corrosives onto victims’ faces or bodies, often leading to long-lasting physical damage and scarring” (45). Despite these legal advances, acid attacks remain alarmingly frequent, with approximately 300 cases reported annually (“India Reports 300 Acid Attacks”).

The film follows Malti (Deepika Padukone), attacked at age 19 by Basheer Khan (a man she treated as a brother) for rejecting his advances. The title *Chhapaak*—an onomatopoeic splash—embodies the brutality of acid violence, while the non-linear narrative juxtaposes Malti's surgeries, court struggles, and activism. One of the most haunting moments occurs when Malti first sees her disfigured face in a mirror after surgery. She cries out, “Main kaise dekh rahi hoon?” (How am I looking?) (*Chhapaak* 00:30:15). The audience is compelled to confront the violence inscribed on her body. Yet, Gulzar shifts focus from pity to resilience. Malti asserts: “Unhone meri surat badli hai, mera mann nahi” (They changed my face, not my spirit) (*Chhapaak* 01:12:20). This dialogue becomes the film's moral center, reframing the survivor as an agent of change rather than an object of sympathy. The film repeatedly uses dialogue to emphasize voice over violence. In court, Malti says: “Awaaz uthana zaroori hai, warna chup rehna ek aur jurm hoga” (It is necessary to raise a voice; silence would be another crime) (*Chhapaak* 00:48:00).

When Malti is rejected for a job at a beauty parlour, she bitterly remarks: “Beauty parlour mein kaam karne ke liye beauty ka hona jaruri hai” (*Chhapaak* 01:02:10). This moment exposes how patriarchal society equates women's value with physical appearance, marginalizing those who fall outside narrow ideals. In contrast, Davis in his book, *The End of Normal: Identity in the Age of Biocultural Era* (2013) argues for replacing the concept of “normal” with “diversity”:

Acknowledging that there isn't one regent or ideal body or culture—that all are in play concerning each other and should be equally valued. Diversity is in fact a much more democratic concept than normality since diversity applies to the broad range of the population unlike normality, which eschews the abnormal” (Davis 2).

Malti's resilience thus reflects a rejection of beauty-based hierarchies in favour of diversity, dignity, and voice. Amol (Vikrant Massey), the activist, reinforces her agency: “Tum lad rahi ho

sirf apne liye nahi, un sab ke liye jo awaaz uthana chahte hain” (You are fighting not just for yourself, but for all who want to raise their voices) (Chhapaak 01:22:45). The film culminates with Malti’s speech to fellow survivors: “Yeh sirf meri kahani nahi hai, yeh un sab ki kahani hai jinke khwab chhinn gaye... Lekin awaaz ab chup nahi hogi” (This is not just my story; it is the story of all whose dreams were snatched... but our voice will not be silenced anymore) (Chhapaak 01:45:00).

Acid Attacks and Gendered Violence: The movie *Chhapaak* picturizes the real story of Laxmi Agarwal who was attacked at the tender age of 19 after refusing advances from a man named Nadeem/Basheer Khan, she considered a brother. Dipika Padukone as Malti Agarwal represents Laxmi Agarwal and recounts the heart tearing event of acid attack and its physio-mental impacts on the victim. Her aspirations to be a singer are destroyed by one *chhapaak*—a splash of acid. The film follows her journey: seven corrective surgeries, emotional trauma, struggles for employment, and her eventual rise as a voice for survivors after violence. Her indomitable spirit is captured when she asserts: “*Unhone meri surat badli hai, mera mann nahi*” (They changed my face, not my spirit) (*Chhapaak*). She has been an inspiration and a symbol of strength for many women in this cosmos.

Causes and Motives of Acid Attacks

Revenge and Jealousy: Basheer Khan attacks Malti for refusing his sexual advances, aided by a woman (Parveen Shaikh), showing how patriarchy co-opts women into violence, and it proves the proverb that a woman is the greatest enemy of woman. If she had denied him, he would have left the idea of acid attack. (Chhapaak 00:23:40).

Gendered Violence: Acid attacks are the grotesque face of toxic masculinity, punishing women as Malti observes: “Attack unhi ladkiyon pe hua jo ya to padhna chahti thi ya badhna chahti” (Attacks happen on those girls who want to study or move forward) (Chhapaak 00:55:10).

Cultural Factors: The unregulated sale of acid and glorification of violence in social media (e.g. TikTok creator Faizal Siddique was suspended for a video glorifying acid violence (TikTok Removes Video).) sustained this crime.

After Effects of Acid Attacks

Physical Consequences: The survivors suffer throughout their life due to disfigurement, blindness, permanent scars and lifelong health issues. Malti’s entire face and neck are disfigured; and one ear was damaged permanently. Malti undergoes seven surgeries, painfully asking her doctor to reconstruct her ear (Chhapaak 00:40:25). The audience cannot forget her piercing cry when she looks at the mirror to see her face for the first time after acid attack.

Psychological Trauma: In most cases, acid burns the physical face and the psychological face of the victim who is unable to face the world with the burnt faces. As Malti confesses, surgeries are painful but “facing courts and media” is worse (Chhapaak 01:05:30). The film captures her silent agony when she holds an earring but realizes she has no ear to wear it.

Social Stigma: Survivors face constant rejection and ridicule. Malti's parents hide mirrors and photos; children call her "ghost." Job rejections highlight how beauty as social currency. Laxmi Agarwal herself remarked: "There's no category called acid attack survivors or else I would have ticked it" (Agarwal).

Prevention and Legal Measures

The film underscores legal reforms, particularly *Laxmi v. Union of India*, which made acid sale regulation mandatory. The Criminal Law (Amendment) Act 2013 inserted Sections 326A and 326B in IPC, prescribing minimum 10 years' imprisonment for perpetrators. Acid attack survivors are recognized under the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016, ensuring reservation in jobs and free treatment. Sections 166A and 166B further penalize failure to record complaints or refusal to provide medical treatment. Courts have also enhanced survivor compensation from ₹50,000 to ₹5,00,000.

Awareness campaigns such as Stop Acid Attacks mobilize survivors across India. Their election campaign "*Jago Chunav Hai*" emphasized political accountability ("Stop Acid Attacks"). Cafés like *Sheroes Hangout* exemplify survivor-led initiatives to reclaim dignity.

Voice of Survivors: *Chhapaak* moves beyond victimhood, foregrounding survivors' testimonies. Malti becomes the collective voice of acid attack survivors, echoing Laxmi Agarwal's real-life statement: "My smile is my revenge" (Agarwal). She reminds us of *Suvidha*, the protagonist of the novel '*Ashes and Fire*' (2022) by Vikas Sharma. *Suvidha* takes revenge on the vagabonds who murders her husband. Amit Kumar Bhagat writes in his paper, *Manifestation of Pro-Feminism in Vikas Sharma's Novel 'Ashes and Fire' (2025)*, "*Suvidha* as if she were the incarnation of *Maa Kali* starts killing the demons...Within seconds two vagabonds fall dead and the rest three ran away from there." (21) Beyond cinema, survivors have transformed trauma into activism. *Sheroes Hangout*, a café in Agra and Lucknow run by survivors, proclaims: "Drink coffee, support courage" (*Sheroes Hangout*). Such initiatives redefine visibility and dignity. The Stop Acid Attacks campaign rallies with slogans like: "End Acid Sale, End Acid Violence" (Stop Acid Attacks).

Conclusion

The film critiques delayed justice and inadequate rehabilitation, demanding collective responsibility from survivors, governments, NGOs, and society at large. Acid violence originates first in the mind and then manifests on faces, bodies, and lives, affecting not only individuals but also families, communities, and the nation. *Chhapaak* insists that justice lies not merely in punishing perpetrators but also in dismantling beauty-based hierarchies and patriarchal norms. Meghna Gulzar avoids sensationalism or pity; instead, she restores dignity to survivors by foregrounding their voices.

Ultimately, *Chhapaak* underscores the importance of empathy toward survivors, challenges rigid beauty norms, and advocates stricter legal measures. More importantly, it amplifies survivors' voices, celebrating their indomitable spirit, epitomized in Malti's declaration: "They changed my face, not my spirit" (*Chhapaak* 01:12:20). By narrating trauma with empathy and resilience, the film transforms violence into testimony and silence into speech. From victim to activist, *Chhapaak*

emerges as a cinematic triumph over trauma and a call for collective responsibility to end acid violence

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